



Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Environmental groups challenge outdated MPCA mining permit

Minntac is currently operating under a permit that expired in 1992

November 9, 2016 (ST. PAUL, MN) — Today the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA), on behalf of itself and partner organizations Save Lake Superior Association and Save Our Sky Blue Waters, filed a lawsuit in Minnesota state court against the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) for its failure to control known pollutants discharging from the U.S. Steel Minntac tailings basin, including pollution causing the destruction of an important natural resource in Minnesota: wild rice.

U.S. Steel's tailings basin at Minntac—located in Mountain Iron, Minnesota, in the Northeast part of the state—leaks millions of gallons of contaminated water per day to groundwater and surface water, and has wiped out once-abundant wild rice in nearby lakes. The tailings storage facility was built in the 1960s, prior to modern environmental laws. But it must comply with these laws now, and it does not.

MPCA has not issued a new water pollution permit to U.S. Steel's Minntac facility for decades. The permit that Minntac currently operates under expired 24 years ago, and does not control for many of the pollutants that are known to be coming out of the facility. Since the permit was written, MPCA has adopted pollution standards for additional pollutants not mentioned in the permit. In its suit, MCEA is asking a court to order MPCA to write a new permit that applies all current water quality laws to the Minntac facility.

“Companies across the state of Minnesota are required to comply with the Clean Water Act,” says Hudson Kingston, staff attorney at MCEA. “We only expect U.S. Steel to be held to the same standard as everyone else.”

“This mining pollution is a major cause for concern for those of us living nearby in Northeast Minnesota,” says LeRoger Lind, president of Save the Lake Superior Association. “Legacy mining pollution harms our communities, lakes, and rivers—which MPCA has failed to protect for decades now. We are concerned that MPCA is considering permitting much more risky sulfide mining in the Lake Superior basin, but hasn’t shown that our existing iron mines can operate without polluting.”

“Our members, and all Minnesotans, are alarmed about water pollution that affects our ability to canoe, fish, and enjoy the rivers downstream from the Minntac tailings basin, such as Lake Vermillion,” says Lori Andresen, president of Save Our Sky Blue Waters. “There is no good reason for a permit that expired decades ago to continue to allow for harmful pollution to these waters.”

MPCA’s own records show that, for at least five pollutants, Minntac is causing extreme violations of water quality standards in groundwater and downstream rivers and lakes, including a trout stream. MPCA’s own records show that the groundwater around the tailings basin no longer meets drinking water standards.

The complaint against MPCA was filed in Ramsay County District Court on November 9, 2016.

About the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy

MCEA is a nonprofit organization that uses legal, legislative and scientific expertise to protect Minnesota’s environment, its natural resources, and the health of all Minnesotans. Founded in 1974, MCEA advocates for sound environmental policies which provide positive, long-term solutions to the most critical environmental issues facing Minnesota. MCEA is the leading legal

voice protecting Minnesota's environment, with deep organizational expertise that includes some of the foremost environmental law and policy professionals in the state.

About Save Lake Superior Association

SLSA, founded in 1969, is the oldest citizen group working to preserve and protect Lake Superior. It was organized to help stop the dumping of taconite tailings into Lake Superior by Reserve Mining, whose tailings were threatening human health and contaminating water and aquatic life. SLSA's mission to protect the lake includes the preservation of land and water in northern Minnesota. Violations of environmental standards by the mining industry are of importance to SLSA's mission and its members who live throughout northeast Minnesota. Lake Superior is cleaner today because of actions taken by SLSA.

About Save Our Sky Blue Waters

SOS is a Duluth-based grassroots non-profit public interest environmental education and advocacy organization dedicated to protecting our region's waters, forests, and wildlife. The health of northeast Minnesota's waterways is a key component of SOS's mission. SOS formed in response to proposed copper-nickel sulfide mining and exploration in Minnesota's Arrowhead region, the headwaters of Lake Superior, and throughout the Superior National Forest. SOS opposes contaminated mining water discharges in northeast Minnesota.

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